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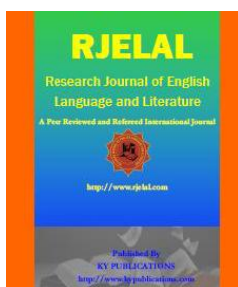
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SECOND GENERATION IMMIGRANTS: NEGOTIATING CONTESTED IDENTITIES IN DIVAKARUNI'S *QUEEN OF DREAMS*

Dr. VIBHA

Assistant Professor of English

Govt. College for Women, Tosham, (Bhiwani) Haryana, Affiliated to MDU, Rohtak



ABSTRACT

In recent years, there have been innumerable studies regarding second generation immigrants. The present research paper explores the shaken identity of the immigrants in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Queen of Dreams*. The term immigrant refers to residents who come to U.S. from other countries. The second generation refers to the U.S. born children of immigrants, and the term third generation refers to everyone born to parents who themselves were born in U.S. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the remarkable women writers to have contributed on explicit fiction to the much debated vein of the narrative on cross-cultural conflicts an immigrant faces. The novel is about Rakhi, the daughter of an immigrant couple who have settled in California and wish to bring up their only child as an American, shielding her from the past lives of India. The study focuses on the "remaking of identities" for second generation children-how they negotiate different identities in the U.S. cultural setting. The paper also examines that how Rakhi yearns to know about the land from where her parents' belong. The study projects the dilemma of these immigrants between "Indianness" and "Americanness" i.e. about their roots. The paper proposes to follow the protagonist through her differing journeys in an attempt to fashion some conclusions as the new nature of identity. The novel examines that how the immigrants beliefs about 'belongingness' are shaken, the characters continue to identify as American. The novel clearly brings out the multifaceted problem of identity through her characters. Rakhi , the protagonist, Jespal, Belle, Sonny and third generation immigrant Jona adapt to their environment and considered America as their homeland. In the wake of 9/11, Rakhi along with her friends has to grapple with dark new complexities about their acculturation. The paper focuses on how they are doubly displaced after an event of 9/11, they are neither Indian, nor are considered American. The event of 9/11 introduced terrible conflict and confusion into Indian American community.

Key Words: Second Generation immigrants, Indianness, Americanness, problem of Identity.

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Indian English literature refers to the body of works of writers in India who write in English

language and whose native and co-native language could be one of the numerous languages of India. It

is also associated with the works of members of the Indian Diaspora. Indian Diaspora writers contributed significantly in the field of literature. All in all, recently, Indian women writers who have chosen to live outside India - like Kiran Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Uma Parmeshwaran, Arundhati Roy, Tanuja Desai, Meera Alexander, Meera Syal, Jhumpa Lahri, Farahan Sheikh, Ravinder Randhawa have launched the Indian literatures in English into fresh and emergent territories. All these women writers' experiences are edged as they have to suffer double marginalisation- one as a women and another as an immigrant. They deal with the problematic of gender, issues of immigrant identity, racial conflicts and cultural confrontation. The impressive progress of the South Asian diasporic writers left an indelible impact on literature.

Within this growing intellectual group of writers, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an enticing talent that proposes "yarns of yarns" to entertain audiences all over the world. Chiefly, Divakaruni's fiction accounts for a trans-cultural project. In her works one can consider that writing is understood as a way of recovering and intercommunicating cultures, but also as an open proposal that suggests another sort of creation that goes beyond fetish dichotomies between native and foreign traces, local and universal, past and present. What does it mean to be Indian women in America today? Few writers speak of hyphenated- American experience more accurately and gracefully than Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Her novels are frequently rooted in the complexities of the home. She explores the pull of the east and the beckoning west faced by her characters. She finely balances her characters on the high-tension wire of the family and is able to explore the issues that compel her most like identity, loyalty, independence and tradition. She illustrates the tug of war faced by the character between tradition and modern values. She dwells upon the subject of immigrant experiences for her writing style, both narrow in focus and broad in scope. In an interview, she states thus:

I think being an expatriate is good for writers. Moving away from a home, culture often allows a kind of disjunctive perspective that is very important— a slight

sense of being the outsider, being out of place. (Interview with Katie Bolick)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in her fiction, short stories, displays an everlasting ability as storyteller, showing her particular tribute to the Indian tradition. At the same time, her narrative development subsumes a deep understanding of the multiple socio- cultural life of India, past and present. She loves complicated characters that live torn between worlds apart. She was born in Calcutta and spent the first nineteen years of her life in India. At the age of nineteen, she married to Murthy Divakaruni in 1979 she now lives in Sunnyvale, California. As she began living in the United States, Chitra become more and more aware of the differences in culture and it was then that she wanted to write as a means of exploring these differences. As a short story writer, novelist and essayist, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has gained a wide national and international audience since the publication of her short story collection, *Arranged Marriage*. Divakaruni is concerned in her writings with this quest for self for the Indian immigrants which may begin with their attempts to assimilate. It might begin with a change in name and continue through change in dress, accent, eating habits and trying to adapt to the new culture. As in conversation of 'Gains and Losses' Gowri Ramnarayan quotes:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni focuses on the immigrant's experience, the fluting between the old and the new, from a woman's perspective. (Interview with Gowri Ramnarayan)

In recent years Migration, has no longer been perceived as a one way definition move from an origin to a target point, but increasingly as "an always undoable and redouble process of redefinition within new contexts and value systems prompted by globalization." (Maria -Sabina Draga Alexandria n.page) People are travelling across borders; national perceptions of identity are giving way to wider conceptualizations of selfhood as always in the making, always changing masks to fit within next context.

Divakaruni had received huge critical acclaim for her warm and complex narratives of

family life and Indian immigrants trying to straddle the two cultures - their Indian heritage and the American Dream. She presents the immigrant who is continuously struggling with his surroundings and himself in order to find their real identity in the world, where they are given dual identities – identity based on the roots (the country to which his parents belong) and the place of birth. As Jaina C. Sanga writes:

Moved by the dual forces of pre-migration and post migration conditions, touched by the pains of women in male dominated societies, and inspired by the desire to preserve memory, Divakaruni first began writing poetry, then moved on to short fiction and eventually to novels. (Sanga 84)

The present paper explores the shaken identity of the second generation immigrants in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Queen of Dreams*. The term immigrant refers to residents who come to U.S. from other countries. The second generation refers to the U.S. born children of immigrants. This particular novel *Queen of Dreams* narrates this hyphenated identity, the ways in which the characters chart the process of journeying: whether it is through a complete shift in life style and perspectives. Divakaruni's writing is compared to Bharti Mukherjee's novels *Desirable Daughters* and *Jasmine*. *Queen of Dreams* is a novel about Rakhi. Divakaruni's narrative of this novel focuses on Rakhi, the daughter of immigrant couple who have settled in California and wish to bring up their only child as an American, shielding her from their past lives in India. The daughter has never been to India but is determined to identify her 'roots' so that she can understand her identity as an Asian American appropriately. She has imagined India only through photographs and other images available through globalised networks of communication. Though Rakhi never sees herself as an immigrant, it is a part of her parents' lives and by logic, her own life. Thus she feels incomplete without internalised this other side of her existence. The novel emphasises how the experience of the people generates the identity of a space and how it is important to capture the spirit of the place to understand the people that inhabit it. Denver post noted that this story is of an

emotionally distant mother and a daughter trying to find herself transcends cultural boundaries.

Divakaruni effectively takes the reader into an immigrant culture but she also shows the common ground that lies in a world that some would find foreign. Rakhi is the main character, narrator as well as the protagonist of the novel. She was born in America and thus represents second generation immigrant. Divakaruni states on her choice of Rakhi as second generation immigrant narrator:

Having explored so many of the stories of women coming over here, I wanted to explore another side of the diasporic experience: What happens to the second generation? The experience of the second generation is becoming more important. (Interview with Susan Comminos)

The second generation immigrants stand bewildered and confused, and show resistance also to the discourse of power in various forms. As Rushdie states:

In the following generations, these confusions, problems and yearnings become less intense as they get influenced by the culture of that country and also adapt themselves to it. (Rushdie 9-21)

The main theme of the novel is search for identity or negotiating contested identity becomes clear when we look at the journey of Rakhi to Riks. Her parents who are Indians name her Rakhi but Rakhi has become Rikki for friends and Riks for Sonny. Her name, Rakhi – Rikki – Riks gives her a hyphenated identity. What further complicates situation is that this host land is also her land of birth and her sense of self emanates from this land which for her should be her native soil, but then why she hankers after India as her past? In Divakaruni's novels the identity issue takes on another colour that of making a position for themselves in their adopted country.

As Divakaruni's states in an interview:

We draw from dual culture, with two sets of world views and paradigms juxtaposing each other ...Expatriates have powerful and poignant experience when they live away from their original culture – and this becomes home, but never quite, and then

you can't really go back and be quite at home there either. (Rediff Chat)

Rakhi, after her divorce, makes her living by running a coffee house called 'The Chai House' with her best friend Belle, which was later named as 'Kurma House'. The Kurma House becomes a microcosm of Asian American community. As stated by Rakhi:

My Kurma House is suffering a sea changed, growing into something very different from what I had envisioned...*International*. (240)

Rakhi finds Indianness in the shared sense of community that her father's acquaintance and his friends bring to the "Kurma House". The basis of shared experience can be in the form of Hindi film songs.

And my father, who has sung only for himself until now... Launches into the melody, his voice made truer by the hoes of strangers. The men nod their heads to the beat- clearly, they know the words too...after a few minutes, one of them takes a mouth organ, out of a pocket, while another lifts a small, two ended drum out of a bag I hadn't noticed. When my father starts on another song ('Sing us a gana from *Sholay*, Bhai Sahib) they accompany him filling our shop with gaiety... They've forgotten our presence even my father. (194)

The thoughts that run through Rakhi's mind are caught in a hybrid sense of her identity and she desires to experience, that her father's generation seems to have carried from their land of origin. Even though at this point of time, these experiences seem exotic and fantastic predictions of a land that is "once upon a time, in a land far, far away," (196) she has a sense of kinship with them.

Then there is noise at the door, and a group of people around my father's age come in some wear Western clothes and some are in Kurta - Pajamas, but what I notice most are their faces. Lined, unabashedly showing their age, they hint at eventful pasts lived in places different from this one, difficulties and triumphantly that I can't quite image. The word *foreign* comes to me again,

though I know it is ironic. They're my countrymen. We share the same skin colour. (193-194)

Here, Rakhi is shown caught between two worlds of experiences "re-memorizing" her roots, quest for identity. She thinks her roots in America. She suspects that why the listeners keep coming back to the Kurma House and she realises it is because of shared community. Ashcroft aptly describes in the words:

In the case of diasporic peoples 'place' might not refer to location at all, since the formative link between identity and an actual location might have been irredeemably severed. But all constructions and disruptions of place hinge on the question 'Where do I belong?' The place of a diasporic persons 'belonging' may have little to do with spatial location, but be situated in family, community in those symbolic features which constitute a shared culture, a shared ethnicity or system of belief including nostalgia for a distant homeland. It is when place is least spatial, perhaps, that it becomes most identifying. (Ashcroft 125)

Through Rakhi, Divakaruni shows the readers a slice of immigrant life that is much more amalgamated into the melting pot of the west. Rakhi's closely entwined narratives of real world, her life as a second generation immigrant, that the plot progresses.

Everything is going well but a new political crisis occurs that shakes the sense of community. The crisis is 9/11. The author has written this novel as a direct response to 9/11 haunted not only by the vivid images of what happened but also by the repercussions felt throughout the country especially in the South Asia American Community. Divakaruni remarks in her interview:

I want to touch people, to have them think about issues they haven't considered before to make them more compassionate towards other people", She says "That was my major intention with writing this book after 9/11: If I could make the pain and the hope powerful enough in the book, then

maybe I might stop some of the prejudice out there and have same sort of counter effect to what followed 9/11. (Interview with Terry Hong)

This event of 9/11 totally shakes the roots of second generation immigrant who consider America as their homeland. The response of Rakhi on this attack is illustrated when she hears a broadcast:

We look at them all, then at each other in disbelief. How could this have happened – here at home, in a time of peace? In America?

A new broadcast is woven into the replays. A street somewhere in the Middle East where people are dancing and handing out sweets because the American devils have finally got what they deserve ...

The scene of devastation in New York had been terrible but this broadcast upsets me differently It makes me want to drop a bomb on these people and end their hellish celebration. (255-256)

Rakhi, Belle, Sonny and all Asian American immigrants are in a shock that how this can happen here. After this broadcast, Rakhi has forgotten her hyphenated identity and thinks of herself as American. She feels herself attached to the pain; chaos the nation is suffering and she wants to take revenge on the rivals.

The pain, hope and prejudice that the narrative highlights assumed certain complexities for the people with hyphenated identity. For instance, Rakhi does not understand why Java café would put up the American flag and big banner “PROUD TO BE AMERICAN”. Belle also suggested Rakhi to put American flag in the shop but Rakhi comments:

‘Belle I don’t have to put up the flag to prove that I’m American! I’m American already. I love this country- hell; it’s the only country I know. But I’m not going to be pressed into putting up a sign to announce that love to every passerby.’ (264)

Rakhi is shown in a state of flux that why she needs to prove herself that she is American.

The aftermath of the terrorist attack can even be seen in the way the people arrive Kurma House. The

people who have formed an imagined community in her Kurma House seek a sense of belongingness in her café but at the same time, they come outfitted in western gear and feel insecure. In those political crisis situation four men enters into the shop and starts devastation as they think them as terrorists’ pals. The comments, of the men, to Jespal, a second generation immigrant, totally shattered the sense of identity:

‘Looked in a mirror lately? ... You ain’t no American! It’s fuckers like you who planned this attack on the innocent people of this country. Time someone taught you faggots a lesson.’ (267)

This event brings a drastic change in the outlook of Rakhi, who thinks herself as a part of this soil, America.

“I look at my reflection in the glass- the brown skin the Indian features, the dark eyes with darker circles under them, the black crinkles of my hair. It’s familiar and yet, suddenly alien.

You ain’t no American, one of the men had said. ... *And how many others in this country would have agreed with him today?* But if I wasn’t American, then what was I? (271)

This passage presents that Rakhi has totally lost her sense of belongingness to the land where she was born. But now the situation arises that where she will find her roots. So, the racial riot in the aftermath of 9/11 signifies a volatile level of hatred that fear combined with a sense of insecurity inevitably generates. If it is not open violence to non – American, it is a concealed distrust and Rakhi observes how she has become an outsider in a land that she was born and bought up in. Rakhi’s friends and family go through the harrowing experience with the racial riots in the aftermath of 9/11.

I think of the people in the lowers and in the air planes, who lost their lives. The people grieving thought, who lost their loves one. Leaders and decision makers, who lost belief in their in vendibility. And people like us seeing ourselves darkly through the eyes of strangers, who lost a sense of belongingness. (279)

The terrorists attack on America and the attack of four young Americans on the protagonist's shop, bring a deep and lasting effect on the psyche of the protagonist. This is illustrated through the painting painted by Rakhi:

Crash of a glass cracking, fear like slime tracks up her arm, how she couldn't clean it off for a long time afterward, no matter how hot she ran she bathwater. She starts Painting them in: a Sikh man shot at a gas station because someone thought he was Middle Eastern; terrified woman peering from behind curtain that look like burkhas; Jespal's turban unravelled like a river of blood, his eye the swollen purple of a monsoon sky. The background is a collage of faces striped red, white and blue. A fist waves a flag so mammoth that if it falls, it'll suffocate them all. The birds have disappeared, their places taken by airplanes. Some crash into buildings same drop bombs as easily as insects drop their eggs. She paints in a *GOD BLESS* sign. .. When she stands back to look, the colors and shakes come together in a rush that makes, the hours on her arms stand up. She gives it the only name possible: *You Ain't American*. (279)

The narrative tries to devise a means of surviving the violence latent in the 'in – between' space of Diaspora. Rakhi observes that how her friends have become protector and the event of 9/11 bring her close to her family, out of ashes, Rakhi, like a phoenix rekindles her love for her husband and her family. The novel ends on a note of limited optimism of a mind that is entrapped in the inability to understand the volatility of the diasporic space.

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